Naked, He Built the Indians' Winter Fires

WHITE SLAVE of the HAIDA

An Historical Adventure

By BRUCE McKELVIE

FOR MORE THAN a century and a half one of the foremost true tales of adventure has been the story written by John Jewitt, the armourer of the brig Boston, of the captivity of himself and John Thompson, sailmaker of the same vessel, who were held for nearly two years as prisoners of Chief Maquinna at Nootka.

Captain Salter and other members of the personnel of the Yankee trading vessel were murdered by the Indians. The simple tale as recounted by the young blacksmith has enthralled every generation, and is still being reprinted. It is a gripping story, but there is an equally fascinating narrative of Indian butchery of white men, and of an even more cruel imprisonment of a sole survivor of a similar attack ten years prior to the capture of Jewitt and his companion.

The incident of savage treachery took place on Queen Charlotte Islands by Chief Cumshewa and his people in July of 1794. The sole survivor was a sailor named Bears. He had been held as a slave to the slaves of Cumshewa, his brother Scotseye and the nobles of the Haida village. The story of this year of torture, and of how two trading vessels rescued the unhappy white man, is contained in the original log book of the ship Ruby, Captain Charles Bishop.

In crisp, dramatic language Captain Bishop penned the story of Bears as he had it from the man himself. Page after page of the log was filled with the bold script of the horrified captain.

It was on Sept. 11, 1795, that the Ruby entered Nootka Sound where she found the snow Mercury, Captain Thomas Burnett, swinging at anchor in Friendly Cove. Bishop went aboard the other vessel for a chat. What he heard surprised him.

The ship Jefferson, Captain Josiah Roberts, out of New England, has brought out a smaller vessel that had been assembled at one of the Pacific Islands, to act as a consort to the larger craft. She was placed under command of Captain Burling and carried a crew of 11 sailors. On the very first trip to the Queen Charlotte Islands this schooner, which was named Resolution, disappeared.

Suspicion pointed to Cumshewa as having been responsible. This was largely founded upon an attack made about the same time by this powerful chief against the trading vessel Phoenix, Captain Hugh Moore, from Bengal. He had been trading with the Haidas and started watering his vessel when the Indians attacked. One sailor was killed. The Phoenix moved closer to shore and opened fire on the natives. To his surprise they answered with cannon, and the Phoenix was forced to withdraw. It was suspected that he could only have obtained such weapons by scuttling an armed vessel after pillaging her.

THE DESPATCH, Captain N. Elias Newberry, was also about the Islands and word had been received of the imprisonment of a white man by Cumshewa. Newberry was trying to plan some way of rescuing the unfortunate, when he was accidently killed. He had presented a pistol to a chief named Illtadze. They were sitting in Newberry's cabin, and the Indian picked up the gun and snapped it. He did not know that it was loaded. It went off and Newberry was mortally wounded. He only lived long enough to exonerate the chief.

The despatch, continued her trading. She fell in with the Mercury and it was decided to investigate the conduct of Cumshewa. The two vessels went to the Indians' fortified village. They managed to seize Chief Scotseye, brother of Cumshewa, and the war leader of the tribe, together with his wife and family. They held them as hostages, and demanded the surrender of the white prisoner.

At first the Indians denied that there was a white man in bondage. The capture of the redoubtable warrior chief had not been easy and there had been some fighting in which a number of natives had been killed. At last a woman admitted that there was a white slave. When any ships appeared, she explained, he was dragged into the woods and chained to a tree. Finally he was brought to the Mercury by two squaws.

Such is the background. Now let us look at the old logbook, and hear what Bears had to say when he was brought into Captain Burnett's cabin to recount his experiences.

"It will naturally be supposed his joy on this occasion would exceed all bounds," wrote Captain Bishop in telling of the liberation of the slave. "It was not so; he was, in fact, insensible to it. So worn down by grief and cruelty he had scarce strength to ascend the side of the ship. Sitting down on the deck on his hams like the natives, (he) expressed his feelings in a broken manner with a mixture of his own and the native language, and it was not for some days afterwards that he was enabled to give any account of his captivity . . ."

"IT APPEARED that the vessel they cut off and to which this man belonged, was a schooner, consort of a Captain Roberts in a brig belonging to Boston. She was manned with 11 men and anchored at Cumsewa's some time in July, 1894. The natives came off in great numbers and before the crew could put the vessel in a posture of defence they rushed in and killed them in an instant. This man was filling powder into cartridges and before he had time to look on deck the shout of the savages announced his misfortunes.

"He hid himself away in the hold, while they were taking the dead bodies on shore, and then they fell to work rifling the vessel and which they did effectually by the morning. Amongst the last articles that they removed in the hold, they discovered him in a cask. Instant death was what he expected, and what he said he wished. They, however, took him on deck and then a long debate took place whether he should live or die. At length it was settled . . . and he was carried on shore in irons, where he beheld his headless companions . . .

"That night they made him lie on the heads which they had scalped, and in the morning drag the dead bodies on board the vessel which they set fire to and she sunk at her anchor with the ashes of her unfortunate crew."

Captain Bishop was getting tired at his unaccustomed pen work, for he exclaims: "To write this man's misery during his captivity would fill many sheets. Suffice it is to say, that in every respect he was treated as a **slave of their slaves.** He was stripped quite naked and kept so while with them, not even a maro about his waist. If he twisted one up of rushes, it was torn from about him with that savage inhumanity which distinguishes these people from the race of human kind. Whenever a ship appeared in sight, he was dragged into the woods and was chained to a tree. The winter was remarkably favorable (but most severe in cold): in this time he was forced to cut wood, make their fires, and then was driven from the sight of it, outside the hut, and not even allowed to approach the slaves' fire, but to bring them what they wanted.

. . . in such a Haida home as this that the unfortunate Bears learned the fate of a slave of slaves. He lived to describe it.

"REDEMPTION of this poor fellow has been not only an act of humanity, but policy; he has given an account of their manners, and designs, which could not have been obtained but by his sad experience.

"Their wars are frequently begun, even amongst themselves, by opportunities of striking the first blow with advantage, and a stranger coming among them, unless specially well appointed, is in danger of attack, and the jarring factions always unite on such an occasion, although they fight often about the division of their booty. The sailor was taken and placed always in the front of the foremost canoe when going to battle, and a musket put in his hands. He was at several battles where the modes of attack were various.

"The principal battle he saw, was last June, when Cumshewa with 11 armed canoes went to fight Skidegate, a tribe a little to the north of his. They arrived, with great parade before the village, where a big palaver ensued between the contending parties. At last it was resolved to draw a line on the beach, passing of which by either party should be considered as the first blow. It was agreed also that they should fight with knives and spears, and the sailor was not to join the contest as muskets were prohibited.

"Chief Skidegate now drew the line on the sand, and retired to the village side where the whole tribe stood armed with a short knife like a dagger, and a spear, with their leather war-dresses on. Cumshewa, with his people landed, and drew up in good order with the same arms, on the other side of the line, keeping the canoes in the rear ready for a retreat.

"THE TWO PARTIES stood more than an hour within the throw of a spear, provoking each other to begin. At length, Cumshewa's brother crossed the line and thew a spear and was followed by the whole band with their horrid cries of war. The spears once thrown were not resumed, but for the space of ten minutes they fought hand to hand with daggers, and 11 soon fell on Cumshewa's side and eight on the other. Cumshewa gave way and retired with precipitation to the canoes, leaving Skidegate master of the field of battle, together with the killed and eight wounded prisoners."

There was a sequel to this capture by Cumshewa of the white man and the barbarous slaughter of the crew of the Resolution. Some other details of attack and the aftermath are contained in the Oregon Historical Quarterly.

It is recounted that in 1799 Captain Burling's brother came to the coast in command of the brig Eliza. At Kaiganhe, in Alaskan waters, he was told by a chief: "Your brother who was with Captain Roberts' little vessel was killed by Scotseye; and Kendrick's brother (Solomon Kendrick, mate of the Resolution and a brother of the famous Captain John Kendrick), too. You must certainly avenge their deaths."

Burling resolved to do so. Learning the whereabouts of Scotseye, he visited the place, representing his vessel as of British registry, for the Cumshewa Indians would not go aboard an American ship. Scotseye accepted an invitation to visit the vessel. Sail was raised and she sailed to Kaiganhe where Scotseye was handed over to the tender merciest of his most inveterate enemy.

Had Bears any pretension to learning, as had Jewitt, it is possible that his complete story would have been more sensational than that of Maquinna's captive. As it is, however, it is only known because of the old logbook in the bold hand of Captain Charles Bishop of the Ruby.